

360° east

Ahmad Humeid's text,  
image and audio commentary  
on [design](#), [media](#) and [technology](#)  
from a [confused Arabia](#)

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## Apps from Arabia

October 6th, 2010



The iPhone and iPad are fundamentally changing the software business.

One of the most remarkable things is how easily these iDevices are making us slip from one software universe to another one: from computers dominated by software from Microsoft, Adobe and Apple to portable devices dominated by, well, no one in particular.

I am finding myself spending more and more time inside applications written by tiny companies or even just one person. My time on the iPad is spent on the Twitter App (before that on Osfoora fo Twitter, written by [Said Marouf](#), an Arab iPhone developer who resides in the US), [GoodReader](#), the amazing all purpose PDF/document reader (developed by Russian iWizard Yuri Selukoff), Pulse, the amazing RSS reader (developed by [Ankit Gupta](#) and [Akshay Kothari](#), two Indian-born Stanford students).

Are you noticing the trend here?

The iSoftware revolution is totally international. It is software



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globalization taken to an extreme.

That's why I shouldn't have been so surprised yesterday when, after digging around in the updated version of 2Do, my chosen To-Do app, that it came from Saudi Arabia!

2Do is an extremely capable and elegantly designed app. The iPad version which just came out takes it to new levels. And it turns out to be the result of a collaboration between Saudi developer [Guided Ways](#) and a Saudi digital designer who goes by the name [Bandar](#). Perhaps the most well known iApp of Arab origin is Weather HD from Egyptian development firm [Vimov](#), who have achieved star status on the global iPhone and iPad development stage, with their products reviewed by the likes of the New York Times, PC World and Ars Technica.

So despite the the fact that Apple App Store is highly controlled and centralized, it has truly flattened the world of software development. Yes of course I use Safari, Google Earth and Adobe Ideas on the iPad, but most of my usage time goes to the above-mentioned apps from companies or developers that no one has heard of just a few years or even few months ago.

With Android rising and other mobile platforms emulating Apple's success, we can only expect more exciting developments in this field. We are still at the beginning of the mobile app revolution.

And Arabia can have its place on this new map of mobile software, as evidenced by the examples I mentioned and many others that I haven't even heard of.

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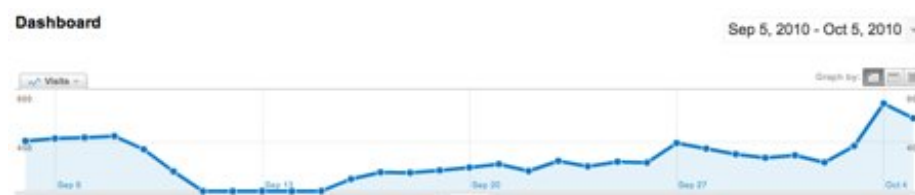
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## The fall and rise of 360east

October 6th, 2010



I was checking the statistics of 360east.com this morning and saw this interesting graph that I thought is worth sharing.

Those who follow this blog might have noticed that it was down from 11-15 September. I had a problem with the domain name, which required a few days to be solved.

That's where you see the traffic tumble to zero.

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After the site was live again, there was a slight recovery in the traffic until it reached a level of around 500 visits per day. During that period I wrote no new posts.

The peak, almost hitting 1000 visits/day is for 4 October, when I wrote my previous blog post about universities in Jordan.

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## Jordan's Universities: watching as we destroy our future

October 4th, 2010

I am the product of the Jordanian educational system in the late 1970s, 80's and early 1990s. Not everything I learned came from the schools I attended, of course. There is family, friends, private reading and travel. But I can still confidently say that I got an adequate education, with moments of great education.

My last 3 years in high school were spent at a public school, the well know Al Hussein College, after being in a variety of good and bad private schools before. Yes, at Al Hussein College, they used to whip us on our hands with a stick if we came too late or didn't adhere to the governmental school uniform. And yes we had some unbelievably physically aggressive teachers (boxing, kicking, etc). But at least it was an experience of teenagers from all kinds of social background sitting side by side: from the kids of Al Hussein refugee camp to Middle class kids. Maybe we also learned some discipline and good Arabic there!

My architectural studies at the University of Jordan were a mixed bag. But overall I had a great experience there from 1990 to around 1995. We had a great, motivated class (again, mixing all kinds of people) and some really good teachers. In my later university years I became involved in student politics, adding to my exposure an experience.

Up until a few years ago, I always thought that sending my kids to a Jordanian University was a possibility.

Now, I am sorry to say that I have completely changed my mind.

Unless I see a new university rise in Jordan, based on proper academic and social principles, I will do my utmost to offer my kids a college education abroad.

Just today, two columnists from Al-Ghad Newspaper simultaneously rang the alarm bell for the state of Jordan's universities (Arabic: [Hani](#)

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[humeid's](#)

Al Badri, Dr Akef Al Zu'bi) . Countless articles have been written about this. Even the Minister of Higher Education has voiced extreme concerns.

Yet the People and the State seem to just watch as the ship sinks.

What was once the pride of the Jordanian state, is now a complete disaster.

I had the chance to visit my old Architectural department this summer for a small reunion. Two of my classmates teach there now. The stories I heard were scary. The buildings are in a state of disrepair. It looks like nothing was done since we left in the mid 1990.

On this and other visits to prominent state universities in Jordan you hear and see the same things.

Apparently, it is a common practice for students to simply buy their graduation projects from offices who specialize in this shameful "business". Fully designed, rendered projects, complete with architectural model are bought by the students and hung up on the wall for the juries. Damn!

During our days, there were some minor stories like that. But nothing of this scale of academic forgery.

The professors seem powerless to change anything. The buildings are decaying around them and they are just sitting there. Their salaries are a joke too.

Classes are swamped with students, many of them don't even deserve to be there, academically. Some of the students show zero interest in their work and have graduation projects so bad that a monkey could've done better. I've seen this with my own eyes and talked to some of these unfortunate students who are shoved into this mass production environment that produces people with empty academic titles.

Then you have all the stories about sectarian fights. Jordanian/Palestinian nonsense. Which tribe are you from. Blah Blah Blah.

Like so many other things in Jordan, such as our national media policy, our social integration policies, our political development, education is deteriorating. The country is getting bigger. People increasingly have access to all the means of modern communication, shopping and entertainment, but the bedrock of our future, education is left in a state of crisis.

At the highest level of the Jordanian State, education is held up as a national priority. But on the ground, our universities are being devalued and destroyed.

What I would like to see is the SAME political will the state puts into fighting TERRORISM and collecting TAXES, being put into TEACHING and education.

All our talk about technology, the knowledge society and future-ready citizens is empty talk if the current state of education is allowed to continue. Nothing short of announcing a state of educational emergency,

photos

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appointing a council of respected educators and politicians who oversee the immediate start of rebuilding the universities system will work at this stage.

Entrenched interests that have festered over the past decades will have to be confronted. Costly physical rebuilding might need to be postponed. But re-staffing, re-evaluating general acceptance policies and benchmarking the academic level of students and professors cannot wait.

Selective initiatives and interventions will not work. It's too late. Rebuilding our universities needs to be handled more like a war: organized, serious, total.

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## 10.10.10 One Day On Earth!

October 3rd, 2010

[One Day on Earth Participant Trailer](#) from [One Day On Earth](#) on [Vimeo](#).

On 10/10/10, the entire world is being documented as part of an ambitious project called One Day on Earth ([www.onedayonearth.org](http://www.onedayonearth.org)). Through their website, filmmakers, students, teachers and everyday inspired citizens representing EVERY country in the world have all coming together to film life and culture on 10/10/10.

For all those interested in helping to create a global video time capsule, mark next Sunday, October 10th on your calendar.

This project, which started in 2008, promises to create an accessible global archive representing the beauty, triumphs, and tragedy that occur around the world during a 24 hour period. The United Nations, Red Cross, World Wildlife Fund, Oxfam and about 50 other non-profits around the world are all participating to ensure access to all areas.



While the archive will be viewable to all, those that participate in the project will share the footage for non-commercial purposes (with credit), allowing everyone to create their own edit of the world's story on 10/10/10. The One Day on Earth team has promised to use the shared archive to create a feature film representing all countries.

This project is going to be a great tool for understanding the basic human needs, joys and struggles that unite us, to the unique cultural traditions that give us identity.

What part of life will you share?

To participate, go to: [www.OneDayOnEarth.org](http://www.OneDayOnEarth.org)

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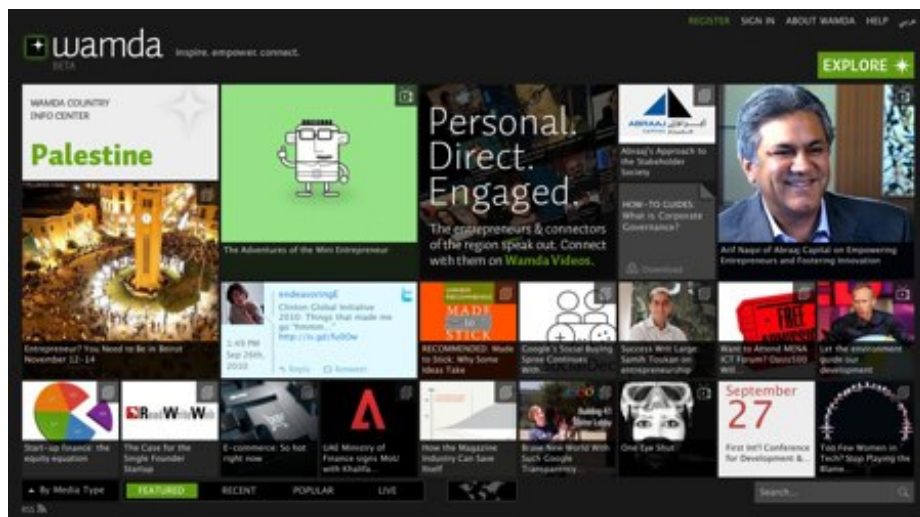
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## Wamda: it started with a spark, now in beta!

September 27th, 2010



For the past seven months, our company duo, [SYNTAX](#) and [Spring](#) has been working on their most revolutionary web project to date. What was just a sketchy idea by early 2010, has become a groundbreaking, living, breathing web venture: [Wamda.com](http://Wamda.com), a hub that, for the first time, creates a focal point for the Middle East's entrepreneurs, creative industries, change-makers and social innovators.

Wamda is being launched by Riyadh Enterprise Development, the small and medium size enterprise investment arm of [Abraaj Capital](#), the region's leading investment powerhouse. With an unprecedented amount of original content from all over the Arab region and beyond, a full suite of online community and social networking tools and

dozens of brand-name partners and supporters, Wamda represents the most comprehensive and deep effort to date to celebrate the enterprising spirit of the region and connect its islands of entrepreneurship.

As we started working on this project I found myself on a plane from Beirut to Amman, after attending the vibrant ArabNet web conference. I was reading the late Samir Kassir's book *Being Arab*. This book starts with an uncompromising critique of the contemporary Arab condition, but yet ends on a hopeful note: that an Arab Renaissance is indeed possible despite borders, limitations and suppression. Kassir saw in the emergence of new media a possibility of connecting the region's simmering culture of creation to its mainstream social reality. I see no better way to describe our work for Wamda. Here is team that brings together Middle Eastern talent with global talent to brand, architect, design, program and develop the content of what will become an exciting new arena of inspiration, empowerment and connections.

### **A new generation of entrepreneurs**

What the new breed of post-real-estate-bubble Middle Eastern entrepreneurs need is a place that reminds them that they are not alone, and that in every corner of this wide region there are people who are sparking ideas, initiating change, growing businesses and engaging with society to create a better future. Entrepreneurship in this region is not a new invention or an imported concept. But many in this region may have forgotten that there are more ways to create value than the simple extraction of the earth's riches or the building of skyscrapers. Wamda ultimately wants to empower a new class of leaders, change-makers and connectors and help weave an ecosystem of support that allows a culture of creation, innovation and prosperity to flourish.

On Wamda you will see a Jordanian owner of a home-grown coffee shop chain talking about her experience of transitioning her career from media to retail, two Emirati brothers reinventing the shawarma sandwich, a tech entrepreneur who stuck with his idea for over a decade to finally strike it big, a Kuwaiti theater maker whose plays tackle society's taboos, a consultant from Palestine who can write the book of how to do business under occupation, a father who turned personal grief into effective social action, a publisher who is using cartoons to challenge stereotypical perceptions of Islam. Those and many others will tell stories that inspire, excite and inform.

### **Designing a new media experience**

A decade ago, a project like Wamda would have been probably conceived as the Arabic Fast Company or Inc magazine. But being born today, in the age of social networking and the real-time web, Wamda is more than a magazine, and it is wider than a website. The Wamda team at Abraaj, Riyadh and SYNTAX has scoured the web for every regional entrepreneurial spark. As the Wamda.com hub launches it will aggregate hundreds of feeds from blogs, Twitter, company sites and mainstream media outlets, bringing together some of the best minds of the region into one vibrant conversation.

In building Wamda we have taken creative risks. We asked ourselves,

how do we create a web interface at a time where the web is bringing together text, images, video, audio and that is increasingly reflecting the real-time life of people, companies and organizations.

Driven by the client's mandate to innovate, we threw out the manual of conventional web design. Navigation, content display, layout, sharing, authoring and connecting on Wamda have all been reinvented. In doing so, we expect some user bewilderment borne out of unfamiliarity. But then, nothing great has ever been achieved by only sticking to the rules. A website is a living being that can change and mutate. We expect a lot of feedback from Wamda's users which we will work back into the product to create a more refined experience.

The building of Wamda has also brought together our various disciplines at SYNTAX and Spring in an unprecedented manner. Beside the strategy, branding, user interface design and technology skills we usually bring to the table, our team has also developed the Wamda's content strategy, researched the sources of potential stories, coordinated the actions of various content and production partners and produced massive amounts of content in-house. Our work on Wamda will usher in a new era at SYNTAX where we transition from a design-led to design and content led innovation firm. It's an exciting time for us.

### **Team work!**

The realization of the vision of Wamda, which originated at Abraaj Capital and Riyadh Enterprise Development, required a constellation of companies to work closely together: SYNTAX, Spring, SP Productions, The Online Project, Kharabeesh Creative Content and Bila Hudoud Translation, supported by LemonTree, 7iber and others.

The beta launch of Wamda today is the beginning of a journey. The idea, the brand, the experience, the code, the videos and the articles were in the brains and computers of the Wamda team for the past seven months. Now we're setting them free. And in the process Wamda will acquire thousands of owners, namely its users.

The only way Wamda will turn from a flash of an idea to a living reality is through the engagement with the region's entrepreneurs, facilitators, creatives, investors and activists. We are totally excited to have been part of conceiving and building Wamda. We hope that everyone out there can share the sense of excitement and possibility that this project holds.

### **A BIG thank you..**

Projects like Wamda only come together through true partnerships. The concept and commission came from Abraaj Capital and Riyadh Enterprise Development. We worked with a sharp, demanding and innovative team of executives including Tom Speechley, Khaldoon Tabaza and Ovais Naqvi who practically became a permanent resident at our offices!

SYNTAX and Spring's team has been working really hard on Wamda. We never had such a big team on one project. A heartfelt thank you goes to everyone who contributed to Wamda, in alphabetical order 😊

Ahmad Sabbagh / Senior Designer



Aseel Haddad / Project Coordinator  
Eddie Taylor / Chief Communication Strategist  
Elia Haj Elias / Quality Engineer  
Ibrahim Oweiss / Designer and Animator  
Khalil Majdalawi / Lead Technologist  
Lina Abdelhadi / Senior Designer  
Mamoun Othman / Web developer  
Mohammad Assaf / Senior Designer  
Mohammad Sabbagh / Designer  
Nina Curley / Content Curator  
Rana Obeidat / Office Manager  
Razan Khatib / CEO, Spring  
Sana Batayneh / Web Developer  
Tareq Abu Rahmeh / Designer and Musician  
Supported by almost everyone else in both companies!

Check out the public beta of [Wamda](#) now..

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## Is Nokia trying to attract app developers or scare them away?

August 14th, 2010



Be warned. It's time for another long Nokia post on 360east!

Last week ago I was in Beirut to attend the first Nokia Levant Developers Forum.

The fact that Nokia actually holds such local events and goes through the trouble and cost of flying people to Beirut shows you how hard the company is trying to stay relevant. Not even in your dreams would Apple or Google hold a developers forum just for the Levant.

Now I am not an app developer (in the technical sense), but the companies I am involved in definitely provide mobile app design and development services. So as I was sitting through the half-day of presentations in Beirut I was wearing several hats: that of a developer, that of a blogger and also that of corporate communication consultant. The latter hat is, after all, my day job.

I am geeky enough to understand what an SDK is and how an application development environment works. I even can endure (or even enjoy) a talk about coding!

So, in return for flying me to Beirut, a city I greatly admire, I decided to turn this blog post into a piece of free advice to Nokia, a company that I also admire (despite its uninspiring phones lately and its outright clunky user experience).

The Nokia's Levant Developer Forum intention was to "bring the ecosystem together". Developers, businesses, consumers and marketers all need to connect if the app revolution is ever to come to Nokia. And it was interesting to watch Nokia actually trying to do this in the Levant.

But the first thing I felt at the Forum is: Nokia is doing all the right things, but it looks like its awaited app revolution just isn't coming together.

Why?

Well here are my thoughts on this.

Let's start from the consumer..

### **User Experience, User Experience, User Experience**

As a user of both a Nokia X6 and an iPad I can tell you this: browsing and shopping for apps on the iPad is a sheer pleasure. I actually LOOK FORWARD to finding and downloading new apps for the iPad. The same cannot be said for the X6. I really hate the OVI store. I know that Nokia keeps trying to improve it. But it is simply a clunky and a kind of stop-and-go experience. In my mind it is a series of pop up warnings.

In the Forum, Nokia talked about how dominant it is in the Levant in terms of number of handsets. It talked about how its Jordanian users are all technology and gadget lovers. It talked about how relevant its local maps are. But here is the first piece of advice: as long as the Nokia user experience is not fixed, and I mean on the phone and on its desktop software, people will not start downloading and buying apps.

I LOVE the Nokia Amman map for example. But I had the X6 for a few months now and did not get around to downloading the map. It doesn't download automatically on the phone over Wifi. The Nokia

MapLoader on the Mac seems buggy. And I had a bad experience with the OVI suite on Windows (even some Nokia people told me its better to use the old Map Loader). Do you see the problem. A free map and free navigation is available, but the bad user experience is getting in the way.

One of the cool apps I DID download on the X6 is Joikuspot, which allows me to turn the phone into a WiFi hotspot anywhere (using the phone's mobile data connection). It works fine. But I distinctly remember that the process of getting onto the phone was not really smooth.

It's almost like Nokia has to forget everything for a few months and just concentrate on revolutionizing its user experience and interfaces.

### **Don't confuse developers with a million choices**

After the introductory marketing presentations at the Forum, it was time to go a bit more technical.

An hour into the show, I felt that Nokia was describing a maze that consists of devices, operating systems and development platforms. A dizzying array of choices, development methods, add-ons and other auxiliary stuff.

At the heart of this maze is the fact that Nokia, with its dominant position in handsets, is in love with its legacy and it honestly thinks that even its S40 based feature phones are a lucrative opportunity for developers. Then there's Symbian, which is going through an upheaval with the move to Symbian3 and Symbian4. And there is MeeGo, which used to be Maemo but now is being merged with Intel's Moblin to make MeeGo.

Amazingly, Nokia seems committed to ALL of that.

When talking to some Nokia people at the forum, there is a distinct "engineer's" attitude to all of this. The cure-all answer to this maze is: QT (pronounced "cute"), the new development platform which let's you write your application once and deploy it on Nokia's multiple OS's. To Nokia people, everything is clear. They say "what is the problem" and tell you that everything makes sense.

Yes, it does. Exactly like a spaceship makes sense to its makers. But if you are a mere mortal like me, or a company or freelance developer thinking of testing the waters of mobile app development, I think that Nokia's messages and array of choices will bewilder you, and probably scare you.

For example: a lot of time in the forum was spent discussing native apps and web apps which can access phone functions too (I think there was even a third choice which I now forgot). Slide upon slide where shown discussing the pros and cons of each type, giving me the feeling that I will have to really do a lot of research before even starting development.

Then Nokia told us about a service for developers which allows them to test their code on actual Nokia hardware remotely. A clever solution to a problem that Nokia has created by coming up with so many handset choices (which is a problem of legacy, again).

Even the “signing” of apps, which I guess is some sort of certification measure, warranted lengthy explanations because Nokia is revamping that process and its fee structure.

The end result of all of this is that although all the Nokia people’s presentations were professional and earnest, my mind was beaten into a pulp by the time the presentations were over.

All of this would be OK if your competitor wasn’t called Apple which has a clear message, a limited range of handsets, one OS and no legacy.

Even if Nokia want to support all these OSs and devices, here is some communication advice: don’t talk about it all at once. Even developers are human beings who suffer information overload. Simplify your messaging to developers.

### **Where are the success stories?**

One thing I wanted to see in this Forum was some regional success stories. But for this first edition of the event these were missing. It would have been extremely powerful if a Lebanese, Jordanian, Palestinians, Syrian or Iraqi app developer actually took the the stage and told us how he/she developed and sold an app successfully in the region or worldwide.

The only third party that made an appearance was an ad agency which basically just gave a speech about the importance of technology in marketing today. If anything this exposed how far behind the advertising business is in the region.

If Nokia wants to show the ecosystem actually working, the best way is to give the stage to developers who can share their stories and experience.

### **Owning the future, not the past**

Nokia tell us that a lot of its customers are tech freaks. Fine. But from my casual observation, I think that geeks and real gadget freaks in the region are going for the iPhone and are starting to show interest in Android. Even my wife, who is no tech freak, has switched to the iPhone after a decade and a half with Nokia and she loves some of the apps on her phone.

I was surprised at how little MeeGo was talked about in the Forum. A demo of MeeGo would at least have ignited some interest in Nokia’s future. But Nokia still chooses to talk about Symbian S40 and S60 and so on and so forth at a time where Apple and Google are busy gobbling up mind and market share and even Microsoft is betting its mobile future on a new, clean OS, namely Windows Phone 7 (which breaks with its legacy completely).

Does Nokia seriously think that feature phone users or even most of its Symbian phone users will be the early adopters of apps in the region?

When Nokia released the N900 running Maemo, I felt that [something exciting was happening](#). Here was a product with edge and character. But the excitement that Maemo has generated has now been lost in the wait for MeeGo.

It's a particularly difficult moment for the Nokia brand: a dominant company that is losing mindshare, lagging behind in terms of user experience and excitement, proud of its legacy but still waiting for the future. It's difficult for me to imagine how an app revolution will happen under such circumstances.

My gut feeling would be to say something radical needs to happen (like totally dropping support for Symbian and just focusing on MeeGo).

But the Finns might have something else in mind. Maybe they will depend on their installed base and slowly but surely arrive at the shores of safety. Being a company that is so old and that has already transformed itself several times over the last 100 years maybe gives them some form of inner confidence that things will sort themselves out.

I will certainly keep an eye on Nokia.

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## Rescue downtown Amman from the “Bab Al-7ara” attack!

July 31st, 2010



King Faisal Square in 1958. From Getty Images:



Does the Amman Municipality and do Ammanis want that Amman's downtown is turned into a cheap-looking touristic area? Because that's EXACTLY what is happening at an alarming speed.

I had breakfast at Hashem, the famous Hummous and Fuul restaurant yesterday and then went for a quick walk down Faisal Square. I can tell you: the way things are going in downtown Amman is scary.

First of all, there was a smell of sewage in several places. I know it's summer and the heat causes sewage smells to leak out. But there is definitely something wrong with the sewage system. Also, the downtown sidewalks are totally grimy and the level of street cleaning is not great.

King Faisal Square in particular is currently at a very critical stage.

The current moment can be described as follows: the decline of downtown Amman has now reached its lowest point. Almost all good retailers are gone. Cheap stores have taken their place. A lot of things on the streets are in a state of disrepair and dirtiness.

At the same time, however, new commercial functions are moving in as downtown is gaining a new level of entertainment and tourism attractiveness. And there is an ambitious project by the Amman Municipality to rehabilitate Faisal Square.

It's like we're seeing the deepest decline and the beginnings of a revival at the same time.

Faisal Square was the first boulevard of Amman in the early 20th Century. It is where the young Hashemite State displayed its presence through military parades. It was where the Arab Bank choose to build its impressive Amman building in the 1950s. It is where the best shops and offices where. In short it is a street that deserves to to be revived and celebrated.

While I am hopeful that GAM's revival project of the street will be well done, I am extremely worried about the new cafes/restaurant phenomenon that is spreading like wildfire in and near Faisal Square.

These are all imitations of the now-famous Jaffra cafe that opened some years ago opposite the old Post building.

While Jaffra itself was an interesting development, as it attracted people back to downtown (the pirated DVD shops where another factor, of course), it already had its own design and image problems. It clearly suffers from what some are calling the "Bab el 7ara" phenomenon. People opening cafes and restaurants in the old neighborhoods of Amman are totally misunderstanding the word "heritage". Instead of celebrating the real URBAN heritage of Amman's downtown, they make their restaurants look like something out of a village or like a fake version of old Damascus.

Just have a look at the design of this new restaurant on Faisal Square.



Brown wooden pergolas! Strange additions to the windows! Copper lanterns! Yellow stone facades stuck on the original buildings! There is even an image of Petra made in yellow stone!

I am sorry but this has NOTHING to do with old Amman. The image created here is "touristy", fake and cheaply done. Because of lack of guidance and followup, well-meaning entrepreneurs will simply replicate this model until Faisal Square all looks this. This is what is happening to Jordan's historic boulevard!

It has to be said that this is hardly the fault of the restaurant owners who probably believe they are doing something beautiful and great. It is either the fault of the unclear regulations, or the lack of enforcement of regulations when these businesses apply for licensing. Dealing with these facts on the ground is tricky, as people have already spent money on these additions.

Mayor Maani is already aware of the same problem in Rainbow Street and something is being done about it. But now downtown Amman is in danger too.

A final word on the work that has started on rehabilitating Faisal

Square. Sidewalks are being ripped open. Manholes are covered with wooden planks. Construction material and equipment is placed here and there. I've seen how mothers, children and the elderly are walking over the rubble of the sidewalk. It's dangerous and dirty.

The contractor of this project should be required to work in a manner that is safe to pedestrians. This is also an active commercial street. The well being of shopkeepers and their shops needs to be taken into consideration too.



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